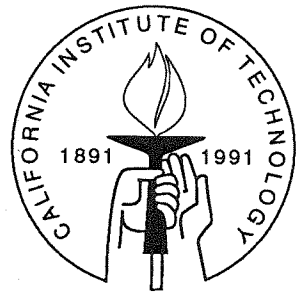


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ACROSS CENTURIES AND CONTINENTS ON THE TRACK OF "CORRECTNESS"

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People who call political correctness "left wing McCarthyism" are correct in detecting a strong family resemblance, but there are important differences, too. And it will be helpful, if one wants to understand this much discussed phenomenon, to locate it in a wider historical and socio-psychological context.

The earliest recorded instance of correctness of which I am aware is St. Paul's "Those who are not for me are against me." The attitude expressed in these words was, it would seem, something new in the Mediterranean world, which, for whatever reason, seems to have tolerated considerable diversity of belief. Amongst the Greeks, tolerance flowed from a lively scepticism, itself the result of a persistent intellectual curiosity. Herodotus, who was a great traveller and the earliest of sociologists, concluded from his study of the diverse customs of the peoples he visited that

If one were to offer men to choose out of all the customs in . . . the world such as seemed to them the best, they would . . . examine the whole number and end by preferring their own; so convinced are they that their own usages far surpass those . . . of all others (*The Persian Wars*, I, iii, 38).

Any Greek who, like Herodotus, was enough of a scientist to adopt the attitude of a neutral observer toward the burial customs of other tribes (the immense diversity of burial practices being the topic under discussion in the passage quoted) would be unlikely to rage against those whose practices differ from those of his own tribe, however much he himself might prefer those that are familiar to those that are different. He would be unlikely, that is to say, to hold that those who are not with him with respect to burial practices are against him.

With the Romans, this unPauline attitude probably had a different source. Though the governing and administrative classes had certainly imbibed Greek culture, acceptance of diversity was probably less a matter of curiosity about the fact of diversity than of policy. Tolerance of diversity of religious belief, assimilation into the Roman pantheon of the gods of the lesser breeds whom they conquered, was doubtless recognized to be much more cost-effective than a policy of suppression would have been. And where diversity of belief led to political deviation, the Romans could of course be ruthless, as the Jews had the misfortune to learn. But still, when all this has been discounted, the Roman policy of religious tolerance was possible only in a society whose level of anxiety about its own religious beliefs was low.

Pauline Christianity thus brought something new into the world -- not death and all its woe, as Milton had it, nor even fear of death and yearning for immortality, inasmuch as these

were features of many contemporary mystery cults -- that of Mithra, for instance -- that, unlike Pauline Christianity, were tolerant of diversity. What marked the latter above all was fear of doing, saying or thinking something incorrect.

From the point of view of the Roman administrators the behavior of the Christians was irrational: They were being asked only to say a few inconsequential words, to make a few inconsequential gestures, as tokens of political conformity; they could believe whatever they liked. But this step, that was so trivial for the Romans, was everything to the early Christians; one step away from correctness, however small it might seem to the Romans, was enough, they thought, to cast them into perdition: if one was not correct in all respects, one was wholly incorrect.

When one contemplates the Roman mind and the early Christian mind slipping past each other again and again in mutual incomprehension, one hardly knows whether to laugh or to weep. But whether one laughs or weeps one must recognize that a profound change was occurring. Western culture had been infected with a virus -- the virus of correctness -- from which it has not yet recovered.

There have been periods in which the disease has been in remission, some of them long enough to encourage optimists to believe that a cure has been found. But the history of culture, as one looks back across centuries and across continents, is the sorry record of the victimization of the incorrect -- Gnostics, Manichees, Donatists, Arians, Patripassians, Albigensians, Pelagians, Waldensians, Hussites.... The list could be extended indefinitely; I mention these not to recall their doctrines, for even their names have been forgotten by all but a few specialists, but to remind us of the many thousands who have been slaughtered, burned at the stake or otherwise sacrificed on the altars of correctness.

It happens that all the cases I have just cited are examples of religious (perhaps one ought rather write "theological") correctness. That in a way is an accident of history and follows from the fact that down to the end of the 17th century the soul's salvation was the chief preoccupation in the West. It is important to understand that *any* set of beliefs whatever will be held to be correct if that set of beliefs is so strongly held that challenges to it are experienced as intolerable.

The psychological drive underlying and animating the phenomenon of correctness was identified by Dewey as a quest for certainty, which he held accounts for all the great metaphysical constructions -- Platonic forms, Cartesian egos, Hegelian absolutes. Interpreted in this way, the activity of philosophers can be viewed as a relatively harmless waste of time that could be better spent, as Dewey said, improving our human traffic with nature and with other people.

Dewey, it seems to me, was correct on three important points: first, that philosophers tend to be averse to living in conditions of uncertainty; second, that the world is a profoundly uncertain place; third, that, this being the case, philosophers will try to escape from this world into another, a secure one. What Dewey did not see, or what he underestimated, is the extent to which most people, not just philosophers, are risk-averse. Nor did he appreciate the fact that risk-aversion accounts for the phenomenon of correctness and so leads to behaviors that are far more malignant than metaphysical construction. The belief system of a strongly risk-averse person tends to be strongly cathected -- one wants one's belief in *x*, whatever *x* happens to be

and however one has come to believe x , to be correct; one doesn't want, once one has latched on to a bit of certainty by adopting x , to fall back into a condition of uncertainty by finding that other people challenge x .

It follows that strongly cathected belief systems, however much they differ in respect to what happens to be believed, have always had a common structure or pattern, due to the fact that doubters must be suppressed lest their doubts come to infect those who hold the strongly held beliefs. Hence a strong exclusivity is imposed: if one is not completely correct, one is completely incorrect. Thus the Arians, who differed from the orthodox by no more than a diphthong, must be put down as rigorously as the Manichees or the Albigensians with whom there were substantial disagreements. In a word, the best defense is attack. At some point a claim of self-evidence is therefore almost always made: since my belief is self-evidently true, your failure to acknowledge it is a sign that you are either a knave or a fool, in any case beyond the pale.

Observe, too, that correctness usually generates an equal and opposite reaction. Just as there is a set of believers strongly committed to the correctness of x , whatever x happens to be -- consubstantiality of the Father and the Son, papal infallibility, infant baptism, total immersion, transubstantiation, episcopal supremacy, good works, a vernacular bible -- so there emerges a set of believers as strongly committed to the correctness of not- x , each group being made more anxious by the existence of the other. It is characteristic of the correctness phenomenon, then, that belief is not only strongly cathected but becomes bipolar in form, with the result that almost all outbreaks of correctness can be described in terms of the 17th century conflict in England between Laudian "thorough" and Puritan "root and branch," where each party was committed to the total extirpation of the other.

How do outbreaks of the correctness virus end? -- for, so far, all have eventually ended. In the past, certainly, they have usually ended with the suppression of one or the other bipolar versions of correctness by the secular authority. The several versions of correctness that came, over time, to be the definition of orthodoxy, in contrast to the versions that came, over time, to be heretical, were those that were backed by successive emperors. And one has the distinct impression that, had these heresies happened to have received imperial support, they would have become orthodox, and orthodoxy would have become heresy.

Indeed, that is just what happened when the imperial power was divided between Rome and Constantinople. And even after Theodosius sided with Rome and orthodoxy, Arianism, driven from the East, survived for centuries on the fringes of the Empire, thanks to the Visigoths, who had been converted to this rival form of correctness. But an even clearer example of the decisive role of political authority in settling conflicts over correctness is the solution worked out on the Continent at the Peace of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years War: *Cuius regio eius religio* -- each Prince's religion shall be the religion of his subjects -- with the result that what was orthodox on one bank of the Rhine or the Danube might be heresy across the river.

But political solutions are immensely facilitated if the cathexis loses some of its power -- if, that is, the rank ordering of preferences begins to change and goods other than the supreme good of being correct about the path to the soul's salvation are taken into account. This transformation began to occur in England toward the end of the 17th century. People

continued to want to be correct, but they were less passionate about it. Dissenters must have begun to weigh the costs of correctness in terms of the lost opportunities to participate in the new enterprise system -- opportunities that publicists like Defoe, himself a Dissenter, were tirelessly describing. *Robinson Crusoe* is much less an adventure story than it is a handbook promoting the advantages of colonial investment, and demonstrating the advantages of postponing gratification and teaching that success in amassing a fortune is a sign that one is favored by Providence and so among the elect.

In this changing culture, though bipolar correctnesses might continue to glare at each other, increasing numbers of the correct -- that is, of the correct on both sides of the bipolar divide -- began to consider the possibility that they might be mistaken about the wickedness, and even about the incorrectness, of the incorrect: the children of the root-and-branch generation became willing to consider the possibility that "presbyter" might indeed be only "priest" writ large.

As the rigid exclusiveness of correctness began to relax, life became viable for people who did not want to be sheerly for and sheerly against: qualifications and reservations and above all, compromises became possible. For instance, the compromise implicit in *cuius regio*, which paid for allowing interstate tolerance by reaffirming intrastate intolerance.

Similarly, in England: the severity of the Act of Uniformity, which had been imposed at the Restoration and which was an expression of the exclusivity of correctness -- clergymen and teachers who did not publicly accept all the doctrines of the Church of England were totally excluded from all preferments -- came to be somewhat moderated, at the beginning of the next century, by the notion that "occasional conformity" to the rites of the Church of England was enough. And although this idea was slow to take on -- it was naturally anathema both to surviving advocates of "thorough" in the Church of England and to surviving advocates of "root-and-branch" among the Dissenters -- it gradually became acceptable to a government and a people who were in search of domestic peace as a basis for prosperity.

Thus occasional conformity and *cuius regio* were typical political compromises that by offering something to all parties deeply offended the Pauline exclusiveness associated with correctness. Such compromises became acceptable only because changes in the social, political and intellectual environment were reducing the rank-ordering that had previously been assigned to being, at all costs, correct.

What was being played out, over and over again, during all these centuries was a kind of "dialectic" -- to use a currently fashionable term -- between purity and power. Correctness yearned for perfect purity, which it knew could not be attained in this, but only in a higher, world. Yet, despite its awareness of the danger of contact with this world, purity was seldom content to renounce it (Christian hermits like St. Simon Stylites are exceptions). Again and again, purity has been seduced into believing that, given access to enough power, it could reproduce its own perfection in this world (for instance, in a company of saints).

Power, on the other hand, suffered no illusions about purity. It sometimes went into battle to defend one purity against the other; it sometimes miscalculated the strength of the passions that are generated by the desire for perfect purity, so that it lost control of them. But it usually sooner or later brought those passions under its control and found ways of diverting their energies to its own ends.

If these paragraphs are acceptable as a quick summary of the history of correctness in the West down to the end of the 17th century, which is the history, specifically, of religious correctness, one can say that since the beginning of the 18th century in the increasingly secular and largely scientific culture of the West there have been few outbreaks of the correctness virus in its religious form (the conflict in Ireland being a painful and unresolved exception) and relatively few outbreaks of the virus in any form.

There have certainly been wars, and on a scale and of a magnitude earlier unknown. But, save for the Civil War in this country, these have seldom been exacerbated by entanglement in the correctness phenomenon. The slavery issue, however, certainly did generate the now familiar pattern of exclusiveness, in which those who are not wholly for us are taken to be wholly against us. And this issue is still so powerfully cathected that it has survived in its correctness form until today. Thus it turned up in some of the comments on *The Civil War* television series, in which the Emancipation Proclamation was condemned from the root-and-branch point of view that political solutions are always wicked concessions to evil.

Certainly communism, as much as slavery, has generated passions capable of conversion into bipolarized correctnesses. And we have been saved from war against Reagan's Evil Empire partly by good luck and partly by healthy respect for MAD, which is to say, by a radical revision in the rank-ordering of preferences, in which for many people physical survival came to have a higher value than salvation, or even capitalism -- better red than dead.

But wars apart, in the West during the last two or three centuries, differences of opinion, even differences with respect to issues that have been highly cathected and bipolar in form, have more often than not been resolved by means of some mutually agreed-on political process.

This was possible because of the gradual emergence of an attitude of mind, not unlike that manifested by Herodotus, that has disposed people to look at even their most highly cathected values in a context of alternative possible ways of seeing and valuing the world. That attitude has distanced people a bit from their own values and so has diluted the passions that would otherwise be generated. Again, advances, first in physics, then in biology and even in the so-called human sciences, encouraged people, now that there seemed to be a reliable way of ascertaining what is the case, to distinguish between what they were initially disposed to believe was the case and what might eventually turn out to be the case. In a word, something like a secular version of the protestant ethic began to operate generally. People became willing to postpone the instant gratification derived from being certain that their beliefs were correct; some were even ready on occasion to admit, in the light of new evidence, that they had been mistaken.

Outside the West the story has been very different. In the Middle East correct Sunnis confront correct Sufis; in the subcontinent, correct Pakistani confront correct Hindus, who are also confronted in Punjab by correct Sikhs; in Sri Lanka correct Tamils confront correct Buddhists Wherever one looks, one finds the now familiar pattern repeating itself: highly cathected correctnesses confronting one another, with no possibility of resolution, either by a political process all parties accept or by an appeal to agreed-on criteria of evidence regarding what is the case. It seems unlikely that anything approaching political or social stability can be achieved in any of these societies until in the fullness of time the passion for being correct at

all costs is moderated by the kind of respect for evidence regarding what is the case that I have tried to describe as an important element in Western culture.

This brings me at long last to political correctness. What family resemblances does it share with all these other earlier and contemporary correctnesses? How does it differ from them? How long-lived and how disruptive is it likely to be?

Political correctness is obviously like all those other correctnesses in being highly cathected and committed to imposing its version of correctness, so far as it has the power to do so, on everybody else. Like those other correctnesses, it is not leavened by a sense of humor or of perspective. Its *mentalité* conforms to the Pauline pattern that has now become so familiar.

Is it also driven, as those other correctnesses have been, by a quest for certainty? That is less obviously the case. Indeed, there is an ambiguity in the meaning of "correctness," as the politically correct use this term -- an ambiguity that may be deliberate and that in any event is proving very useful to them. The politically correct may hold, (1) that their views are politically correct in the way in which the Arians, for instance, or the Hussites held their views to be theologically correct. That is, the politically correct may hold that their views are (i) about politics (instead of about theology), and also (ii) true.

Or they may hold (2) that their views are politically correct in the sense that they represent opinions that, whilst not presently approved by the majority, are the wave of the future. That is, they are opinions that are politically powerful in that they will lead to political change. From this point of view, to call an opinion correct is not to make a truth-claim regarding this opinion, which was certainly the claim of all earlier versions of correctness and is probably the belief of some current advocates of political correctness. Rather, to call an opinion politically correct is to make a prediction about the prospects for that opinion, and to make it in language that is calculated to promote the movement of opinion in the desired direction.

The strategy of the language game that is being played is familiar and is well represented by "You look to be not long for this world," spoken by a son who is waiting impatiently for the death of an elderly parent. In a word, what drives this form of politically correctness is not a longing for purity, but a longing for power.

From whence might this version of political correctness be derived? There are two distinct but overlapping sources, neo-Marxism and deconstruction. Since the former was first in the field and is also the easier to understand, I will begin with it. Neo-Marxists find congenial the version of Marxism expressed in such works as the *Theses on Feuerbach*:

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. In practice man must prove the truth, i.e., the reality and power, the "this-sidedness" of his thinking. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question....The philosophers [sc., scientists] have *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it.

Neo-Marxists do not allow themselves to be troubled by the conflict between this Marxism and the Marxism of *The Manifesto* and *Capital*, which asserts the "scientific" correctness (i.e., truth) of Marxism. From the point of view of these works Marx's prediction

that the state will wither away was not an assertion made in the hope that making it would cause the state to wither away; it was, for better or worse, a forecast as reliable as the forecast of a solar or lunar eclipse. In a word, the claim being made here to correctness is a truth-claim (correct = true), and this corresponds exactly to the truth-claims made earlier for all the various versions of metaphysical-theological correctness.

Nor do neo-Marxists allow themselves to be embarrassed by the self-referentiality of their favorite version of Marxism: that is, the corrosion that occurs when one asks whether the propositions put forward in the *Theses* apply to those propositions themselves. And if not, why not? There it is asserted flatly that "The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory [i.e., of truth] but is a practical question."

Well, if one is not already wedded to neo-Marxism one is inclined to ask at this point: what sort of claim is being made for that assertion? Is a truth-claim being made for it? If not, why should I attend to what is being said? But if a truth claim is being made, then, at least in connection with this particular assertion, we are not dealing with a practical question. The general claim that all questions are practical questions has been falsified in the course of being stated -- quite an achievement.

No wonder then that neo-Marxists avoid thinking about such awkward and embarrassing matters as the problem of self-referentiality: thinking about them (or allowing others to think about them) would interfere with the social and political agenda to which the politically correct are committed.

That political correctness is deeply marked by this neo-Marxist line of descent is evident from the frequency with which "empowerment" is described as the aim of education. "The real issue is power: who has it and who does not." It is ceaselessly asserted that the educational system, the curriculum, appointment and tenure policy are in the hands of an upper-class elite, who use the resources of national offices and national foundations to maintain and expand their hegemony. There is, it is said, nothing new about this; what is new is that we -- "we" is in the first place literary critics and, in the second place, the underprivileged, the excluded gender and ethnic minorities -- have learned what is going on and are exposing the upper-class, capitalist plot.

It is not argued that it would be only "fair" for us to have power, too, or that it is "our turn." That line of reasoning never appeals to the correct; imagine the Albigenians arguing for their position on grounds of fair play. No; the correct never argue. In the case of the politically correct they just state that they lack power and that they intend to get it. Thus one of the politically correct has written, with surprising frankness, that he finds it "tempting to turn the curriculum into an instrument of social transformation," as a result of which the powerless would become empowered.

So much, for the moment for the neo-Marxist route to political correctness. The second, and much more sophisticated, route starts from Saussure's account of reference. That words refer is obvious -- they have meaning. But to what, generally, do they refer? To what, for instance, does the term "horse" refer? Most people would say that it refers indifferently to any one of a number of animals in the real world, that can be described in such-and-such a way, a way that sufficiently distinguishes them from other animals in the real world. When animals are discovered somewhere in the real world that are look-alikes, but all the same not horses (e.g.,

mules, donkeys, zebras), the newly noted differences can be added to the definition of "horse," and we proceed as before. No problem.

But Saussure and the deconstructivists see only problems, insoluble problems. And for the following reason: They point out that if words referred to extra-textual objects like horses, donkeys, and zebras, as the procedure that I have just outlined assumes, reference can never be closed, complete and determinate. There is a possibility (doubtless very remote) that some zoologist somewhere or other, some time or other, will come across an animal which cannot be definitively classified as either a horse or a not-horse. Thus people will never be able to know exactly what they mean.

Agreed. But people who are not victims of the exclusivity pattern of thinking that is so characteristic of the correctness phenomenon are not greatly troubled to have it pointed out that the hypothesis of extra-textual reference can never yield absolutely fixed, determinate reference. It is enough for them if reference can become determinate enough to conduct the various language games which they want to play.

But for the politically correct that is intolerable. For them, it is with reference as it is, in the older forms of correctness, with sin. Just as even the most venial of sins infects and totally corrupts the perfect purity of virtue, so the tiniest amount of indeterminacy in reference totally corrupts the perfect purity of knowledge. Since the root of the problem is the claim that reference is extra-textual, the politically correct conclude that extra-textuality must be extirpated root-and-branch. Words refer, but they refer only intra-textually, that is, to other words.

Note that the mentality making this inference is the mentality of thorough applied to reference, instead of to members of the Church of England. It is the mentality encountered in orthodoxy: whoever deviates in any respect whatever is a heretic; it is the mentality encountered in American First Last and Always: whoever is not 100% is a crypto-communist. It is the mentality encountered in St. Paul's "Whoever is not for me is against me."

That mentality is the source of the inference to intratextuality. We should spell out a bit the consequences of the inference. Consider, then, the word "centaur": It is far from meaningless; therefore it refers. But nobody thinks it refers to real-life centaurs in the way that many people believe "horse" refers to real-life horses. "Centaur," everybody agrees, refers intra-textually, to Greek myths recorded by Homer and other poets, to red- and black-figure drawings on pots, and so on. That is exactly the way "horse" refers, according to the deconstructivists: to the various texts by zoologists, race horse owners, breeders, agronomists and the like in which the word "horse" occurs. And so, according to the deconstructivists, for all terms whatever, without exception.

Let us be sure we understand how very radical the deconstructivist position on intratextuality is. I shall therefore give a real-life example. It is so simple that it will seem trivial, but it has the advantage of bringing out the essential point very clearly.

Among the letters in a recent (May 16, 1991) issue of *The New York Review of Books* is one by Lord Zuckerman, discussing a possible hoax perpetrated by two schoolboys in 1911. The boys presented their science master at Sherborne School with "a piece of old bone on which was scratched the head of a horse," telling him that they had found it in a quarry. Was the bone a fossil? If a fossil, had it been incised recently or in ancient times? And if incised

recently, was it a hoax by the boys or did they find it, planted in the quarry by other hands? Lord Zuckerman gives an amusing summary of investigations of the bone that have continued to this day, and he ends his letter with the hope that the "debate" will continue.

For the deconstructivists there is no more to the bone than this continuing, inconclusive debate. Derrida would characterize it as a dance around an empty hole -- empty because there is no bone to be found where people who have not reflected on Saussure's theory of reference foolishly expect there to be a bone.

Despite Saussure and Derrida, I believe, and I think Lord Zuckerman believes, that there is more to the bone than the debate. In fact, the debate has a point only because there is a bone, only because with respect to the bone something is the case. That is to say, Derrida's hole is not empty; there is a bone in it. Some of what is the case regarding the bone is known -- for instance, its weight and its dimensions. Much that is the case is now unknown and, despite presumably continuing improvement in the methodologies available to paleontologists and anthropologists, may never be known.

To believe that something is the case about the bone -- that Derrida's hole is not empty, but occupied by the bone -- makes it possible to distinguish amongst segments of the Derridean dance -- to distinguish those that are sheer fantasy, those that are highly speculative, and those that have only a surface plausibility from those that are likely correct, i.e., probably true. And this belief that something is the case about the bone -- that is the point I want to emphasize -- operates as a check, as a break, on any tendency we might have to fantasize about the bone, to indulge in wish-fulfilment.

To believe with the deconstructivists that nothing is the case about the bone because nothing can be known with certainty to be the case about the bone -- to believe that because no hypothesis about the bone or about the boys' intentions can be fully verified, no hypothesis is more probably true than any other -- is to believe that the hole is empty. If one believes that, one can then sit back in a relaxed mood, and feel superior to all those who have vainly attempted to fill the hole.

To believe that -- to be relieved of the burden of trying to ascertain what is cognitively correct (i.e., true) -- releases one to believe what is politically correct (i.e., promotes one's own political agenda). Thus, if a deconstructivist holds that schools like Sherborne are citadels of privilege dedicated to maintaining the superior standing of the gentry, he will select a segment of the dance in which it is fantasized that the bone is not a fossil and that the boys' motive in incising it was to secure their admission to one of the Oxbridge colleges. And, having denominated this segment as politically correct, he would denounce all other segments as politically incorrect and regard himself as justified in trying to suppress them.

Not that the deconstructivists actually come out and say any of this as explicitly as I have just been sketching it. Naturally no. To do so would be seriously to undermine the force of what is politically correct. Hence, ever since Derrida injudiciously blurted out that there is no such thing as a beyond-text: *Il n'y a d' hors-texte*, though that is the only possible conclusion to draw from the Saussurean theory of reference, the deconstructivists have for most part evaded this point. They deal with it as Neo-Marxists deal with the embarrassment of self-referentiality. But like the neo-Marxists, they continue to act on the belief. And here, as so often, actions speak louder than silences.

Although I fear this discussion of deconstruction and its impact on political correctness has become tedious, there is one more strand that must be disentangled. It is the lesson that the deconstructivists learned from Heidegger's re-writing of the history of philosophy. The history of Western culture since the pre-Socratics, according to Heidegger, is the history of fatal entrapment in a "logocentric" conceptual scheme, one organized into a number of dichotomies, amongst them self/object, inside/outside, below/above, we/they, active/passive and, dichotomy of all dichotomies, Aristotle's law of excluded middle: either A or not-A. Obviously, this Heideggerian version of the history of language and culture, at least as it is deployed by the deconstructivists, has an immediate relevance to the embarrassments and contradictions to be found in the writings of the neo-Marxists. Contradiction, it turns out, is nothing to be concerned about, for the notion of contradiction is no more than a product of logocentrism.

Thus in *Differance* Derrida magnanimously allows that some of the concepts Heidegger introduces involves a contradiction, for instance, the concept of "trace." But that is no problem,

for one can think without a contradiction, or at least without granting any pertinence to such a contradiction, what is perceptible and imperceptible in the trace.... Heidegger can therefore, in a contradiction without a contradiction, consign, countersign, the sealing of the trace.

This Derridean version of Heidegger's logocentrism is obviously immensely useful to those who buy into it, and one might suppose that the ideal situation for the politically correct would be one in which they and they alone recognize the limitations of logocentrism, leaving everyone else victimized by it.

Yet, somewhat inconsistently (but who cares about inconsistency?) the deconstructivists look forward to a time when logocentrism will be transcended. In *Differance* Derrida wrote about what he called "Heideggerian hope," which seems to amount to praising the virtues of silence, but in the earlier "The Ends of Man," written in the spring of 1968 and coincident with the student uprisings in Paris, he had optimistically suggested that more than two millenia of logocentrism might be ending and that a wholly new language, and with it, a radically new way of experiencing the world and so of re-organizing the culture and the institutions by which it is maintained and transmitted, might be dawning.

This sense of the possibility of revolutionary change just around the corner has played an important part, I believe, in forming the political correctness movement. The passion that animated earlier occurrences of the correctness phenomenon was based on the conviction that one's correctness was guaranteed by God, by natural law, or by what-is-the-case, the latter ascertainable by objective, scientific inquiry modelled on the activity of "the never enough to be admired Mr. Newton".

Since, for the politically correct, God, natural law and what-is-the-case are (by the deconstructivist route) all alike products of logocentric linguistic fallacies, and (by the neo-Marxist route) myths constructed by the capitalist class with the aim of maintaining its political and social hegemony, the passion needed to sustain the correctness movement in the present instance has to be generated in a different way. What launched it, I believe, was the sense (Derrida again) that we are living at the edge of a time of change, of change so radical and so unpredictable that Derrida himself can say only that it "tries to pass beyond man and

humanism."

Thus the passion that launched political correctness was also based on a vision, but not a vision of another world -- neither God's world nor of a world of transcendent Platonic forms nor yet again the world of Newtonian physics. Rather, it was a vision of this world, but of this world transformed by political action. So far, that passion has been sustained by a series of remarkable successes in American colleges and universities. But the academic environment is a special and limited one, and the question, to which I will return later, is how long a passion for correctness that depends on hope, rather than on a conviction that one has got it right about the way the world is, can survive defeat and frustration.

Thus, as things now stand, neo-Marxism and deconstruction mutually reinforce one another in a number of important ways. It is worth pointing out, however, that they do diverge at one point: to the extent that the Women's Movement reads the Heideggerian scenario not as the history of logocentrism but as the history of phallocratism, there is a difference of opinion amongst the politically correct about who the chief enemy is -- the capitalist class in particular or males in general. But since most capitalists are and have been males, there turns out to be less a difference of grand strategy than of tactics between the Women's Movement and the rest of the politically correct.

Taken together, then, neo-Marxism and deconstruction provided humanists and the softer social scientists who were discontent with the place allotted to them in the educational establishment with what seemed a powerful weapon for undermining the set of values on which the pecking order of that establishment is based and its resources are allocated. And indeed the weapon proved immensely successful, at least when applied to the parts of the establishment (e.g., the departmental structures of the humanities) in which they were directly involved.

The weapon was first deployed (in its deconstructivist version only) by literary critics against the literary critical establishment, which held -- and had long held -- that the business of literary critics is to interpret texts, and that the question to ask in evaluating literary critics was: Have they got it right about the meaning of the text? The meaning of the text (what it meant to its author, alternatively what it meant to contemporary or nearly contemporary readers) was a what-is-the-case, doubtless more difficult to ascertain than the what-is-the case concerning Lord Zuckerman's bone, but not in principle different.

Deconstruction first had an impact on literary criticism, and it did so because it liberated literary critics who adopted it from the burden of trying to get it right about the meaning of a text; it freed them to do their own thing, to be authors too, not merely deferential interpreters of other peoples' texts. They could now, under the guise of explicating other authors' texts, produce texts of their own that were, each in its own way, often more inventive and creative than those earlier texts had been. It was all great fun! No wonder deconstruction appealed to many literary critics.

Mutatis mutandis for historians and for the softer social scientists, not only some anthropologists and some sociologists but also law school professors. But take historians as representative of all such "interpretative" scholars: Thanks to their literary-critical colleagues, historians began to realize that deconstruction liberated them from the labor of studying documents in the hope of discovering, as Ranke had put it, *wie es eigentlich gewesen war*.

Further, at this point the appeal of deconstruction is likely to be reinforced by neo-

Marxism. It informs the historian that, since all those earlier historical narratives were but reflections of the class interests of their authors, she would do well to construct a version of the past that promotes the interests of her own class and gender. Hence a convinced deconstructivist historian, who might have continued to read documents merely out of force of habit or for the pleasure of reading what she has come to realize are no more than disguised historical romances, now had a wholly new incentive for reading documents and constructing narratives.

And this incentive can amount to a passion -- not the old cognitive passion for getting it as nearly right as one can about what happened, but a "practical" passion, the passion for advancing one's values, whether those of one's class, or one's gender, or one's personal values as one moves up the tenure ladder. (Old-fashioned, pre-deconstructivist academic types were of course not uninterested in advancing up the tenure tract, nor were they uninfluenced by political agendas. But these interests had to some extent to compete with, and sometimes lost out to, another interest, one based on the belief that something is the case and that it was their business as professors to try to find out what it was.)

In many humanities departments the seductions of deconstruction and neo-Marxism combined to make political correctness dominant. A rapid takeover occurred. These initial successes encouraged their hopes, and strengthened hope fostered an even fiercer and so more intolerant passion, which in its turn produced new successes. The politically correct seem ready for new conquests. How successful are they likely to be?

Certainly humanists and the softer social scientists are not the only people in the educational system who have reason to be discontent with their standing in society, or who feel themselves gravely undervalued by the political and economic system in which the system of higher education is embedded -- underpaid, badgered by legislative and congressional committees, and denied the funding important for their research. And outside the educational system there are large numbers of people -- women, gays and lesbians, ethnic minorities -- with even stronger reasons for discontent with the political, social and economic status quo.

Can the arts of persuasion that were so successful in winning humanists and the softer social scientists over to political correctness be equally effective outside these fields? If, as I have argued, political correctness is distinguished from earlier forms of correctness in being based on the radical cognitive relativism of neo-Marxism and deconstruction, then the answer to that question depends on the answer to another question: How disposed are most people to suspend belief, even belief in what they want to believe, pending evidence that what they want to believe is the case. How likely are they to abandon a belief to which they have become attached, because someone presents them with evidence that it is not the case?

Here I must distinguish. Hard scientists, whether in or outside the educational system, on the whole take evidence seriously. So, for that matter, do most well educated people; that indeed is what is meant by calling them "well educated." (One understands that the politically correct will strongly dissent; what I have just written is an example of the myth of logocentrism/phallogocentrism at its worst.) Accordingly, it seems to me unlikely that political correctness will make much headway among hard scientists. They will not find political correctness remotely plausible; if anything, they will be too wedded to a scientism which assumes not only that something is the case but that what it is has already been ascertained.

And if these hard scientists ever find themselves under heavy pressure from the politically correct they will get help from the central administration; unlike the humanists, they will be judged too valuable to be left defenseless to sink or swim on their own.

The situation is quite different with respect to the larger public. Here things look much more promising for the politically correct. Whether one looks at the public schools in this country or at the media, one is impressed by the manipulation of opinion that now goes on in the press and, above all, in television. One loses confidence that this larger public has any feeling for what-is-the-case, or that, as things stand, there is any serious restraint on people's readiness to believe whatever they want to believe -- or, rather, whatever the manipulators of opinion want them to believe.

So the question really is, can the politically correct get control of the levers of power by first gaining access to the media and then managing to dominate them? That they can seems doubtful. One can imagine -- better, perhaps, fantasize -- a scenario in which, given military and/or economic disaster on a sufficiently large scale, the politically correct might seize power in a *coup d'etat*.

If they succeeded, something like the world described in *1984* and *Animal Farm* would likely emerge: a world in which an inner group of Napoleons manipulate the lives of a large number of Majors, in the best interests, of course, of the Majors. That the politically correct in power would be ruthless seems likely, for the spirit of correctness has always been the spirit of thorough, the spirit of root-and-branch. And in the case of the politically correct, *realpolitik* would not be tempered by internalization of any such phallocratic myths as moral laws.

But that, happily, is a remote possibility. If the politically correct are to move out of the academic sphere into the political arena, it is much more likely they will have to learn the arts of compromise that all politicians must practice. To do that the politically correct will have to abandon their Pauline-like belief that those who are not wholly for them are wholly against them. And practicing the political arts will not be easy, at least if the current situation on campus reflects the mood of ethnic minorities generally. For what is striking about the former is precisely the tendency of the minorities to segregate themselves voluntarily from each other, rather than to unite against what the politically correct perceive to be the common enemy -- the dead, white European males (DWEMs) who still dominate the curriculum.

That the politically correct will be unable to accomplish such a radical transformation of themselves should not be assumed. We have seen again and again how the purity of correctness has succumbed to the seductions of power. It would be foolish to suggest that this will not happen again. But if it does, political correctness will cease to be itself, cease to be correct. It will fade out into the light of common day, becoming no more than one more of those many reform movements that rise, have their brief day and disappear.

That this will be the fate of political correctness is a consumation devoutly to be wished, less because it is dangerous itself than because of the bipolar counter-correctness that it is likely to generate unless it does swiftly disappear.

The initial reaction to political correctness was puzzlement: what was the bother all about? People could not see why they should take seriously a view that concentrated so much attention, so much passion, on usage, on getting accepted a term of which they approved -- "African American," for instance, instead of "Black." Hence they countered political correctness

by jest and the invention of terminological absurdities.

We can now see that ridicule is an inappropriate response: the politically correct have taken to heart the lesson Orwell taught in his discussion of *New Speak* in 1984: those who control the language in which people speak and think control their behavior as well. But those who did not trace out this literary genealogy or, tracing it, were not persuaded of the dangers Orwell saw, were put off by the terminological strictness and exclusiveness of the politically correct. As it became clear that the politically correct were prepared to enforce severe sanctions against anybody guilty of deviant usage, the response shifted from ridicule to constitutional law: lawyer-like arguments based on the First Amendment began to appear.

That is about where we stand now. Although a bipolar confrontation has not yet emerged, there are signs that one is forming. And if political correctness survives long enough, a counter-correctness will almost certainly take shape, led by the Blooms and the Bennetts, reaffirming the correctness of the old absolutes of "Judeo-Christian civilization." Once again there would be two correctnesses glaring at each other, with pressure on everyone to choose sides, to be for or against.

That, in my view, would be a most unfortunate regression, a relapse into an earlier stage in Western culture, which one would have hoped had been left behind. Certainly, if one simply counts centuries, one has to agree that during most of its history Western culture can be characterized, in some very loose way, as having had a Judeo-Christian flavor. But why count centuries? Why not allow the possibility of there having been some improvement in the way in which Western societies deal with deep social conflicts and, even more generally, with their quest for certainty?

This change, which has increasingly marked Western societies since the period known as the Enlightenment, looks to the Blooms and the Bennetts, and to the correct of every generation and every clime, as a weakness. But according to V.S. Naipaul, it is, paradoxically, the great strength of the West. Writing recently about questions he had been asked to discuss in a paper for the Manhattan Institute in New York, he observed:

It was easy to read through the questions to some of the anxieties that lay behind the questions. There was a clear worry about certain fanaticisms "out there." At the same time there was a certain philosophical diffidence about how that anxiety could be expressed.... You know how words can be used: I am civilized and steadfast, you are barbarian and fanatical.... But... I couldn't share the pessimism implied by the questions. I felt that the very pessimism of the questions, and their philosophical diffidence, defined the strength of the civilization out of which it issued (*NYRB*, Jan. 31, 1991).

That, rather than the counter-attack now being assembled by the defenders of the Judeo-Christian tradition, is an eloquent version of the response I hope will be made to the politically correct.

Such a response, rephrased in the vocabulary I have been using, would be the antithesis to all correctnesses and all counter-correctnesses, in that it would rest on the conviction that the educational system, despite all its failings, is still capable of producing citizens who can accept the possibility that they are mistaken, citizens who can get on -- live, even thrive -- in a state of cognitive and moral uncertainty. To reply to political correctness in this way would itself be to act in a state of uncertainty. It would itself be evident that here in the West an alternative to correctness and counter-correctness is still possible.